



## Family Engagement Insider

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# Supporting Family Engagement Across All Grade Levels

Family engagement is the way that families manage and sustain their children's learning and development in different settings across all stages of their children's lives (Rosenberg et al., 2014).

While schools typically have processes for engaging families in their children's learning in preschool and the early grades, family engagement is often less of a focus as students progress in their schooling. In fact, by middle and high school, many educators do not have an explicit focus on family engagement. However, learning during those secondary grades is increasingly complex, and family support becomes as critical as ever.

This issue focuses on engaging families across all ages and grade levels so they can support their children's success inside and outside of the classroom.

### Family Engagement Outside and Inside of School

**Everyday family engagement** happens away from school and away from the gaze of educators. Engagement plays out when parents or caregivers create intentional and meaningful learning spaces and opportunities for their children beyond the classroom.

Meaningful learning opportunities can be simple and informal. For example, parents with children in kindergarten or early elementary grades might play educational games, draw pictures to convey stories, bake cookies together, or create daily home routines, while parents of teenagers might have conversations around the dinner table about current events or read and discuss a book together. These learning opportunities can also be more formal, such as participating in extracurricular activities or, for families with children in high school, taking tours of the local university or community college.

While everyday family engagement happens outside of schools, educators and administrators are an important source of guidance on best practices for engaging and supporting their children during non-school time at all the different stages of their children's lives.

**School-based family engagement**, by contrast, is centered on the activities, events, and communications with the school. It is the exchange of information between families and educators. These are also opportune spaces in which teachers and families can develop mutually trusting relationships. Across all grade levels, school-based family engagement can include families participating in volunteer opportunities, school committees, and parent networks or accessing community social services facilitated by the school.

Think of family engagement events and activities at school as the spaces and opportunities where families build capacity to be engaged with learning. To equip families to support learning in concrete and meaningful ways, school-based family engagement strategies and activities should be intentional, authentic, and connected to learning. For instance, a middle school math teacher might model strategies to families for solving "real-life" word problems; figuring out 15%, 18%, and 20% tips; or using a scale diagram to determine lengths, areas, distances, and other measures in a way that is tangible, visual, and engaging. These types of family engagement activities enable families to experience the application of math concepts using real-life examples.

## School Strategies and Activities That Support Family Engagement from Pre-K Through Grade 12

Families are experts on their children. To help them maximize their expertise and become knowledgeable and confident in supporting their children's grade-level learning, schools need to engage families in intentional and authentic ways. Below are suggested strategies and activities for leaders and teachers to support effective family engagement throughout the school years.

### For Leaders

Across all grade levels, school leaders can implement the following strategies to support family engagement:

- Help educators develop the skills and disposition required to equitably work together with families.
- Build time for educators to plan, communicate, and work collaboratively with families.
- Develop a data-sharing culture so families have a clear picture of progress and performance.
- Align family engagement events to grade-level learning priorities and school improvement goals.
- Provide families a seat at the decision-making table and help them develop leadership skills.
- Identify and remove barriers to family engagement.

### For Teachers

The following table lists some suggested family engagement strategies and activities for teachers to implement at the various stages of schooling.

#### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS

Grade level	Suggested strategies & activities for teachers
Early Childhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Invest time in getting to know each family as soon as class lists are available; conduct virtual or in-person visits, and set the tone for consistent, ongoing collaboration.</li><li>• Bring families together regularly to learn about and discuss important learning and developmental milestones, and model strategies to implement at home.</li><li>• Co-create an engagement plan with families that promotes family well-being, families as lifelong educators of their children, and leadership and advocacy.</li><li>• Support parent-child relationships that value the culture, language, and aspirations of the families.</li></ul>
Elementary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Invest time in getting to know each family as soon as class lists are available; conduct virtual or in-person visits, and set the tone for consistent, ongoing collaboration.</li><li>• To increase equity, ensure fair treatment, access, and opportunities for all families, and work to identify and eliminate barriers that prevent the full participation of some families.</li><li>• Help families understand the foundational grade-level skills that students need to master each quarter, and model activities for families to practice at home.</li><li>• Share progress data and performance levels regularly so families have a clear and explicit understanding of how their child is progressing.</li><li>• Create opportunities for classroom families to network and support each other.</li></ul>

Grade level	Suggested strategies & activities for teachers
Middle & high school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate the voices of students, families, educators, and community partners in your family engagement planning process, and establish clear roles and responsibilities for each of these groups.</li> <li>• What do you want to improve and achieve in partnership with families? Co-develop clear goals and objectives, and measure outcomes.</li> <li>• Explicitly build the capacity of families to use online reporting systems to access grades, attendance, assignment completion information, and discipline referrals.</li> <li>• Use clear terms and visual aids to explain to families when and how their children are tested and the significance of the test results.</li> <li>• Help families understand the meaning and benefits of advanced placement classes and how students can earn college credits while in high school.</li> <li>• Host a yearly conference with families and educators focused on cultivating relationships, developing skills and knowledge, and authoring personalized success plans.</li> </ul>

## Related Resources

**Family Engagement in Anywhere, Anytime Learning** (Article from the Harvard Family Research Project)

**Ideas and Resources for Working with Families During Elementary School** (Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center)

**The Family Engagement for High School Success Toolkit** (Article from the Harvard Family Research Project)

## References

Rosenberg, H., Wilkes, S., & Harris, E. (2014). Bringing families into out-of-school time learning. *Journal of Expanded Learning Opportunities*, 1(1), 18–23.